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DEPARTMENT FOR S/GWI SABA GORI AND RUTH BENNETT, INL/AAE
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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICA: 16 DAYS OF ACTIVISM SEMINAR: IS
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT ENOUGH?

REF: STATE 120322

¶1. (U) Summary: Kicking off South Africa's observance of the 16 Days of Activism, Commissioner for Gender Equality Dr. Yvette Abrahams led a discussion on the social norms and material conditions that give rise to gender-based violence in South Africa. Activists in Cape Town, Durban and Pretoria participated via digital video conference in the event hosted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC). Participants agreed that South Africa suffers from unacceptable levels of gender-based violence and concurred that an elevated level of violence in South African society is part of the lingering legacy of apartheid, but several participants challenged Dr. Abrahams' contention that economic empowerment for women is the single most important factor in eliminating gender-based violence, calling for changes in traditional culture(s) that allow violence against women and children to continue at unacceptable levels. End summary.

¶2. (U) The HSRC hosted a November 27 DVC-linked seminar in Pretoria to kick-off South Africa's 10th annual observance of the international 16 Days of Activism to end violence against women and girls. Commissioner for Gender Equality Dr. Yvette Abrahams delivered a presentation designed to put the issue of gender-based violence in a social and economic context. Abrahams opened with an assertion that one-third of the world GDP comes from the unpaid labor of women. She said twenty-nine percent of South African women live on land under customary ownership, adding that only two percent of South African women own land. Since South Africa's transition, according to Abrahams, only 20 to 30 percent of redistributed land has gone to women, despite the fact that eighty percent of agricultural labor in South Africa is done by women. Abrahams noted that unemployment is 30.8 percent for women in South Africa, compared to 21.1 percent for men. She said women-headed households are twice as likely to go hungry as men-headed households. According to Abrahams, the economic empowerment of women is the single most important factor in the elimination of violence against women and girls.

¶3. (U) During the Q & A session, several participants challenged Abrahams' assumptions, claiming that improvements in material conditions for women in South Africa since the transition have not reduced the incidence of gender-based violence (GBV). Several participants noted that GBV is prevalent even among highly educated South Africans. One participant suggested that more work is needed to study the role of women in traditional cultures. Another participant said that GBV is as much a problem among white South Africans as among blacks. Abrahams agreed with participants who observed that high levels of violence in society became normalized under apartheid, and all agreed that it may take a generation for South Africa to reduce the level of violence in society.

¶4. (SBU) Asked by an NGO participant why South Africa

initially objected to the establishment of a UN Special Rapporteur on Gender-Based Violence, Abrahams said she had been astonished to learn that South Africa had opposed the measure. She commented that South Africa's PERMREP should be voting in a manner that is consistent with South Africa's constitution, and she commented that she assumed the vote was taken without instructions from Pretoria. (Note: South African Activist Rashida Manjoo was appointed UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women in August 2009, lending credence to Abrahams' suggestion that a vote opposing the mandate may have been a glitch. End note).

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The sparsely attended HSRC seminar was one of the key events marking South Africa's 2009 observance of the 16 Days of Activism, along with government press releases and announcements on government websites. There is a core of activists in South Africa who remain engaged full-time on combating violence against women and children, but there is still a long way to go before the awareness and activism results in widespread change in a society still handicapped by unacceptable levels of violence, especially against women and girls. End comment.

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